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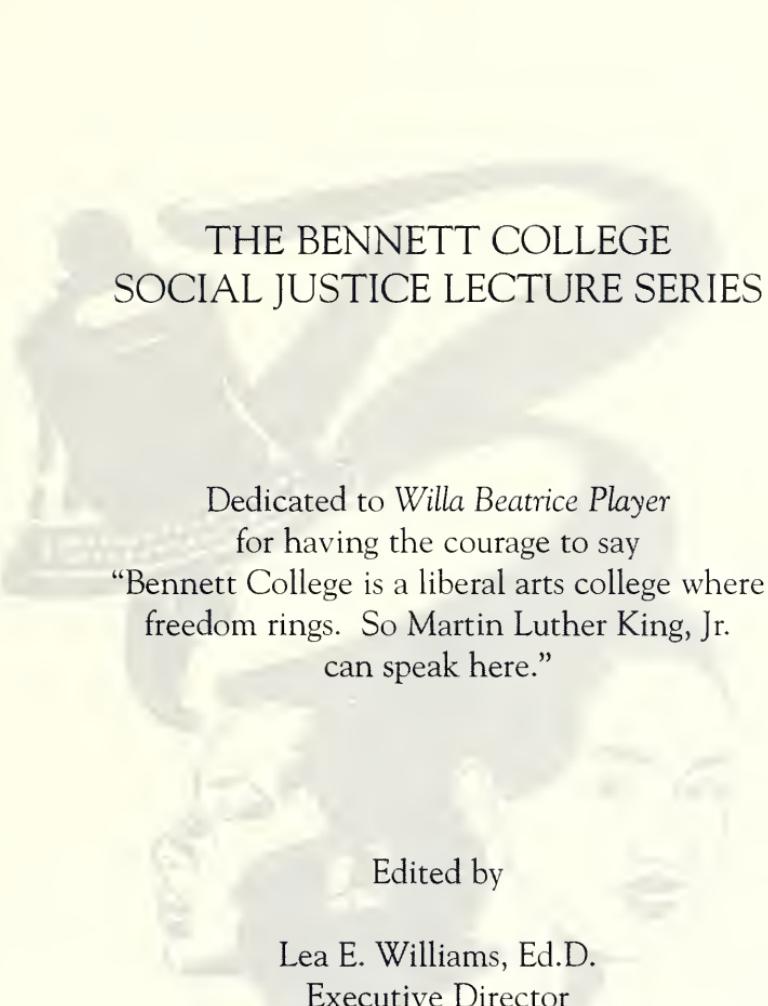
THE  
BENNETT COLLEGE  
SOCIAL JUSTICE  
LECTURE SERIES



"Where Women Are Empowered"

A Project Of  
The Women's Leadership Institute  
with funding from  
The North Carolina Humanities Council





## THE BENNETT COLLEGE SOCIAL JUSTICE LECTURE SERIES

Dedicated to *Willa Beatrice Player*  
for having the courage to say  
“Bennett College is a liberal arts college where  
freedom rings. So Martin Luther King, Jr.  
can speak here.”

Edited by

Lea E. Williams, Ed.D.  
Executive Director  
Women's Leadership Institute

**BENNETT  
COLLEGE**



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*Founders Day Vesper  
October 15, 2000*

Dear Reader:

*We proudly present the second volume of The Bennett College Social Justice Lecture Series. The initial volume grew out of the sixtieth-year celebration of the 1937 student-led boycott of movie theaters in downtown Greensboro. The highlight of this volume is the speech given by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel on February 11, 1958, a few months after he led the successful Montgomery bus boycott.*

*Dr. King's visit to Greensboro was very controversial. Even though King preached nonviolence and practiced passive resistance, many conservatives in the community viewed him as a rabble-rouser. His anticipated presence occasioned irrational fear and suspicion in some quarters. While the African American community eagerly awaited his coming, there was concern about the heightened racial tensions. And so, as the date drew near, it proved difficult to secure a place to hold the mass meeting at which Dr. King would speak.*

*Into this maelstrom of controversy stepped Dr. Willa Beatrice Player, the president and first female leader of Bennett College. Dr. Player invited Martin Luther King to speak on our campus. This courageous act was a*

glorious moment in the history of Bennett College, an institution that prides itself on activism in pursuit of social justice. Dr. Player lengthened the long shadow of social activism and burnished further the legacy of "a liberal arts college where freedom rings." Fortunately for succeeding generations, the King speech was captured on reel-to-reel tape and has been re-recorded on cassette.

Some twenty-three years after Martin Luther King's visit to Bennett, C. Eric Lincoln, a professor at Duke University, spoke at the college. Lincoln, a renowned scholar of black religious life who died earlier this year, echoed many of the social justice themes so familiar to Dr. King's audience. Standing in the place where Martin Luther King stood, Lincoln wondered whether two centuries after the founding of our nation, "we[,] who now stand trembling in the room they left[,] search frantically for some clue that the legacy bequeathed to us is possible." Another twenty years have passed since Lincoln's speech, and the search for justice and equality goes on.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and C. Eric Lincoln leave us with many unanswered questions, but also with a legacy of brilliant discourse that continues to inspire us in our search for answers.

Sinceely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Gloria Randle Scott".

Gloria R. Scott, Ph.D.  
President

THE BENNETT COLLEGE  
SOCIAL JUSTICE LECTURE SERIES

BENNETT  
COLLEGE



## INTRODUCTION

n February 11, 1958, a little over a year after the Montgomery bus boycott ended, an overflow crowd poured into Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel on the campus of Bennett College to welcome Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968).

For those who believe in freedom, Martin Luther King's was one of the most eloquent voices for civil rights and social justice in the twentieth century. Having led a successful boycott to desegregate the city buses, King focused national attention on a social protest movement based on passive resistance and nonviolence. For many, King symbolized that movement. Yet, on that February evening in Greensboro, King reminded the enthralled audience that, "Martin Luther King would not even be mentioned in history if there had not been a Rosa Parks and 50,000 humble people who had the courage to stand up and who said in their hearts that we've had enough."

In that period of our nation's history, African Americans who dared to advocate for their constitutionally guaranteed rights risked harsh reprisals, often with deadly consequences. Well into the twentieth century, blacks were still being lynched at the hands of Ku Klux Klansmen and vigilante mobs. But, in 1954 blacks gained a victory for desegregation when the Supreme Court in its unanimous decision (*Brown v. Board of Education*) dismantled the dual public school system in the South. At the time, it seemed that well-targeted lawsuits, combined with carefully executed direct-action campaigns, would provide the thin wedge that blacks could use to pry open the door of equality.

In the mid-50s large cracks began appearing in the mask of quiet resignation and passive acceptance blacks wore to hide the resentment they felt against the petty slights and daily humiliations of life as second-class citizens. There was a mounting determination to rebel against the status quo. The lines from Paul Laurence Dunbar's well-known poem, "We wear the mask that grins and lies, It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes," captured the tired charade blacks were no longer willing to play. It was this undercurrent of discontent that finally erupted and mobilized blacks.

Fannie Lou Hamer expressed the sentiments of many blacks when she said in her eloquently colloquial way: "I knew things was bad wrong and I used to think, 'Let me have a chance, and whatever this is that's wrong in Mississippi, I'm gonna do some thin' about it.' "<sup>1</sup> Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat to a white man was the spark that ignited black and white determination to do something about it. The movement that resulted gave Fannie Lou Hamer her voice and nurtured Martin Luther King, Jr. into greatness.

King's invitation to visit Greensboro came from local leaders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Edward Edmonds, president of the local NAACP chapter, had fought to desegregate the city's public schools, Cone Hospital, and

the all-white city swimming pool. For his troubles, the Klan burned a cross at his home on the campus of Bennett College where he taught sociology. In addition, Edmonds, who was also a Methodist minister, was dismissed as director of the Wesley Foundation at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. According to Dr. Edmonds, Warmoth Gibbs, president of the university, fired him because his activism was too controversial.<sup>2</sup> Later, however, Gibbs surprised his white superiors by refusing to rein in A&T students participating in the lunch counter sit-ins in downtown Greensboro.

Dr. King's visit was almost called off because a venue proved difficult to find. Fearing economic reprisals from white officials, administrators at North Carolina A&T and the black public schools were understandably reluctant to host him. Although local black churches did not depend on the white community for financial support, church leaders would certainly want to avoid alienating city leaders. Any decision that would impact the church or its congregation, even indirectly, had to be carefully weighed. Apparently, the weight of that decision stalled the ministers.

While Greensboro's church leaders hesitated, Willa Beatrice Player, then two years into her presidency at Bennett College, offered the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel. King's visit, about to be cancelled, was rescued. In order to accommodate the throngs anticipated, the college wired sound to the Little Theatre and other buildings. As expected, every seat was taken.

Hosting Dr. King was a risky business even though Bennett College was a private institution. After all, the college benefited from the goodwill and largess of white philanthropists. The names of prominent families inscribed on campus buildings – for example, Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel, Barge Hall, and Reynolds Hall – attested to the sustained generosity of that support. Lyman Bennett, the college's first benefactor and namesake, gave the first ten

thousand dollars toward the purchase of land for the college and to erect a building that housed the classrooms; it also served as a dormitory. These benefactors were subject to community pressures even when they, like Lyman Bennett, were not residents of the area.

Viewed in the context of the late 1950s, when the strictures and prejudices of the post-Reconstruction South still prevailed, Dr. Player's offer of the Bennett chapel was certainly a courageous act and marked a memorable event in the life of the college. Reflecting over her presidency in a 1993 interview, Dr. Player stated that the King visit was one of the high points of her career at Bennett.<sup>4</sup>

The black community in Greensboro was eager to hear Dr. King's message. Here in the flesh was the young man who had galvanized the black community to challenge the white power structure in one of the most virulently racist states in the South. Who was this man who so quickly ascended to prominence?

Martin Luther King's roots were in the South. Born to a middle-class family in Atlanta, Georgia, King early on was nudged by his father toward the ministry. His education at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University introduced him to the teachings of the great philosophers and pacifists of western culture – Hegel, Thoreau, Kant, Niebuhr, Tillich, and Gandhi, among others. In his youth, he had rejected the emotionalism of the Baptist church; thus, the writings of these intellectuals appealed to him and profoundly influenced his thinking.

Later, during the long days of the Montgomery bus boycott, his Christian faith deepened. King recounted the moment that gave him the courage he would need. One night sitting in the kitchen of his home, feeling despondent and confounded by doubts about the boycott and his leadership of it, King was at the end of his wits. He recalled pleading in his heart for guidance and direction. It seemed

at that moment there came into the kitchen “the presence of the divine,” telling him to “stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever.”<sup>5</sup>

This story, whether true or apocryphal, speaks to the origins of King's faith, a faith that allowed him to lose himself in the struggle and that sustained him through many difficult moments. Lerone Bennett, the historian and *Ebony* magazine journalist, said in his biography of King, that the Montgomery movement, “changed the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., and King, thus transformed, helped to change the face and the heart of the Negro, of the white man, and of America.”<sup>6</sup>

King would make many memorable and great speeches in the decade after his visit to Bennett College: “I Have a Dream” (1963); “Our God Is Marching On!” (1965); “The Drum Major Instinct” (1968), and “I See the Promised Land” (1968).<sup>7</sup> What we hear in King's 1958 speech, however, is the nascent beginnings of his oratorical greatness. The speech echoed many of the themes that would reverberate in his public speaking throughout the next and, sadly, the last decade of his life. He would perfect his delivery, using the rich timbre and familiar cadences of the black Baptist preaching tradition, a tradition that he inherited from his father and maternal grandfather.

As with all great orations, the spoken word is so much more powerful and compelling than any transcription, and so it is with this speech by Martin Luther King. On the printed page, the resonance of Dr. King's stentorian voice is lost to the reader. Yet, the historical significance of the speech is retained. It is significant because it represents a point on the continuum of King's progression from a relative neophyte on the national scene to a revered orator of great stature.

At Bennett College, King spoke for nearly an hour on the theme of changing race relations in the South and the efficacy of nonviolent resistance. Characteristically, he used this occasion to teach as well as to inspire. In the early days of the movement, most audiences were unfamiliar with the philosophical tenets of nonviolent resistance. Once the concept was understood, many were still, quite frankly, skeptical about its applicability and effectiveness. The debate about the best methods to use would continue throughout the movement.

However, in the Bennett chapel, King spoke to an audience on the cusp of a revolution. This triumphant young minister, who preached Judeo-Christian precepts and embraced a nonviolent, pacifist ideology, had come straight from the front lines of black civil disobedience. His listeners that night yearned to be inspired because the kind of bold resistance demonstrated in Montgomery, Alabama, was also simmering in Greensboro, as it was throughout the South. Thus, King's message was manna for the soul.

On that Tuesday evening, King's was an ascending star. The miscalculation of trying to transport southern strategies to northern cities where racial discrimination assumed a more subtly sophisticated form was some years away, as were the suspicions and uncertainties engendered by King's opposition to the war in Vietnam and espousal of the causes of poor people. Also at bay was exposure of the moral ambiguities between the public man and the private self as revealed by Federal Bureau of Investigation wiretaps of King's sexual dalliances. King had yet to shoulder these crosses. This was the dawn of breaking day with its hopeful promises and infinite possibilities.

The seeds sown that night would germinate in fertile soil as Greensboro activists chipped away at the walls of segregation. On February 1, 1960, two years after King's visit, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond sat down

at the all-white lunch counter in the Woolworth's on Elm and Sycamore streets in downtown Greensboro and politely ordered lunch. They were refused service, but the sit-in movement had begun in the South, and it spread rapidly to other southern cities. In March, at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, students formalized their voice in the movement by establishing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. A few months later, on July 25, the first blacks ate at the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro.

The 1960s witnessed the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights bills, which dismantled the last vestiges of legalized segregation. A movement that began on a bus in Montgomery had been heard in the halls of Congress and around the world. The moral conscience of that movement, and one of its most impassioned voices, was Martin Luther King, Jr.

Two decades after King's visit to Greensboro, C. Eric Lincoln (1925-2000), a prolific scholar and professor of religion and culture at Duke University, spoke from the same podium. In his speech, "Come Back, Martin Luther King," Lincoln laments the slow pace of improving race relations and longs for his friend's presence "to bring us together again and to revive us in the continuing struggle toward the realization of what he dreamed about."

Lincoln's speech, included here, makes it painfully clear how deeply entrenched, pervasive and intractable racial issues were, and are, in America. The message Lincoln delivered, a quarter century after the Montgomery bus boycott, acknowledged that discrimination and prejudices refused to yield to reason, to the pressures of mass resistance, or to legislative mandates. In frustration, Lincoln cries out in a self-composed poem at the end of his speech: "When shall we overcome? When shall we overcome?"

A son of the South and a friend of Martin Luther King, C. Eric Lincoln grew up in humble circumstances in Athens, Alabama. He worked his way through college and earned undergraduate degrees from LeMoyne College, now LeMoyne-Owen College, in Memphis, Tennessee, and the University of Chicago. Added to these were graduate degrees from Fisk University and Boston University (M.Ed. and Ph.D.); the latter was also King's alma mater. A bachelor's degree in divinity from the University of Chicago defined Lincoln's lifelong passion for religious studies. Recognized as one of the nation's foremost scholars of the black church, Lincoln was a prolific writer. He authored, co-authored or edited twenty-two books. Among his best-known books are *The Black Muslims in America* (1961) and *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (1990). Firmly rooted in black culture and traditions, Lincoln began his teaching career at Clark College, now Clark Atlanta University, in Atlanta, a historically black college, and later held a faculty position at Fisk University, another black institution. He also taught at Brown University, Union Theological Seminary, Vassar College, and Columbia University, among others. Dr. Lincoln retired from Duke University as the William Rand Kenan Jr. Professor Emeritus of Religion and Culture.

Well past the height of the civil rights movement, in 1981 when Lincoln addressed a new generation of Bennett College students, he reminded his audience about the black experience in America. Just as Martin Luther King had done before him, C. Eric Lincoln transformed the chapel into a teaching platform and a classroom for learning. Both King and Lincoln followed in the lineage of chapel speakers throughout the decades whose messages had hammered home the importance of social and political activism and urged students to engage these issues.

Of course the message to black Americans that we must cultivate and retain a strong social consciousness is ages old. In his classic study of race in America, first published in 1903 and titled *The Souls*

of Black Folk, the distinguished historian, scholar and fighter for black equality, W. E. B. Du Bois, proclaimed that, “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” Martin Luther King, Jr. and C. Eric Lincoln took up that cause in their day. It rests with succeeding generations to continue to struggle with the freighted and peculiarly complex dilemma of black/white race relations in America. Fortunately, we have the wise words of King and Lincoln to inspire us along the way.

Lea E. Williams

<sup>1</sup>Lea E. Williams, *Servants of the People: The 1960s Legacy of African American Leadership* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), p. 159.

<sup>2</sup>William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>Williams, *Servants of the People*.

<sup>4</sup>Linda Beatrice Brown, *The Long Walk: The Story of the Presidency of Willa B. Player at Bennett College* (Danville, Virginia: McCain Printing Company, Inc., 1998), p. 166.

<sup>5</sup>David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1986).

<sup>6</sup>Lerone Bennett, “When the Man and the Hour Are Met,” in C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: A Profile*, 1970, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup>James Melvin Washington, ed., *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World, Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992).

<sup>8</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: New American Library, 1969), xi.



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## “ROOM IN THE INN”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Pastor, Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama

Delivered at the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel

Bennett College

February 11, 1958

D r. [Edward] Edmonds [professor of sociology at Bennett College and president of the Greensboro Chapter of the NAACP], Dr. [Charles] Anderson [pastor of Institutional Baptist Church], members of the Greensboro branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, ladies, and gentlemen. It is certainly a delightful pleasure for me to be in the city of Greensboro and to be able to share with you in the program this evening. I'm very happy to share the platform with these very distinguished ministers and educators. I'm grateful to my friend, Rev. Anderson, for those very kind words. And I'm grateful to Dr. Edmonds, the president of the branch here, for extending the invitation for me to be here. I'm grateful to him for the courageous work that he is doing in this community. And the courageous work that he is doing for the cause of justice and human dignity.

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I'm very happy to bring greetings to you this evening from Montgomery, Alabama, a city in a state that is known as the Heart of Dixie. And of course, we're all aware of the fact that Dixie has a little heart trouble at this time. But the physicians are at work, seeking to cure this heart condition. And I want you to know that the people of Montgomery, the Negro citizens of that city, are deeply grateful to you and to all people of good will, to persons all over this world, who aided them in the struggle for justice. As we walked the streets of Montgomery, we realized that we were not walking alone, but that hundreds and thousands of people of good will walked with us. And above all, God walked with us.

Never forget that the Montgomery story is not a story, it's not a drama with only one actor. But it's a drama with 50,000 actors, each playing his part amazingly well. And I hope you will never forget the humble people of that community. You hear a great deal, I imagine, about a fellow by the name of Martin Luther King. You'll occasionally read his name, and you see his picture here and there. But Martin Luther King would not even be mentioned in history if there had not been a Rosa Parks and 50,000 humble people who had the courage to stand up and who said in their hearts that we've had enough. And who somehow came to see that it is ultimately more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation, and decided to substitute tired feet for tired souls, and walked the streets of Montgomery until the surging walls, the sagging walls of bus segregation were finally crushed by the battering rams of the forces of justice.

I was in the Los Angeles airport a few days ago, and we had a little delay, a slight plane delay. The plane had to be serviced. And I was standing out near the gate, and it so happened that a man was standing next to me that worked for one of the airlines. In a few minutes, we noticed several men running out to that plane. They started carrying out various functions. Most of them were in overalls. You could hardly see the color of the overalls, because they

were greasy and dirty overalls. And that man looked over to me, and he said, "You know, before that plane can take off, about twenty-one men have to work on it. They have various functions, and they do various jobs, but it can't go until those men get to work and do their jobs." And I looked at them. They were doing various things, various things.

Then he turned back to me and said, "That group is called the ground crew." And I started thinking that pretty soon that plane would take off and lift itself possibly above the clouds, and move on down, passing the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado, and on down through the various states, and it would take me successfully home. And I thought about the fact that we hear a great deal about the pilot and the engineer and the copilot. But we must never forget that that plane couldn't make its journey without the ground crew. And the same thing applies in this area of freedom. As we take out on this mighty flight of freedom, let us never forget the ground crew. The ground crew. The people who don't make the headlines. The people who make it possible for the pilot to do his job. Let us never forget the ground crew. And I bring you greetings from the humble people, the ground crew, of Montgomery, Alabama.

But I'm not here this evening to talk about Montgomery. You've heard a lot about Montgomery, and I've spoken a great deal across the country on the Montgomery story and other ministers from Montgomery and other citizens of that city. So I'm not going to burden you with the Montgomery story. This evening I want to try to answer a question, a desperate question, a poignant question, that seems to be on the lips of people all over this nation. They are disturbed and they're wondering whether there has been any real progress in the area of race relations. And I hope I can give some insights on that question. I certainly can't answer the whole question. I can only make a few suggestions here and there. In accordance, you will have to draw your [own] conclusions.

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It seems to me that there are three basic attitudes that one can take toward the question of progress in the area of race relations. The first is that of extreme optimism. You know, optimism is a view that looks on the bright side of things. An extreme optimist would argue that we have come a long, long way in the area of race relations. He would point proudly to the strides that have been made in the area of civil rights over the past few decades. And thus, he would conclude that the problem is just about solved now, and that we can sit down comfortably by the wayside and wait on the coming of the inevitable.

The second view that can be taken is that of extreme pessimism, and you know, pessimism is a view that looks on the dark side of things. And so the pessimist in the area of race relations would say that we've made only minor strides. He would argue that the deep rumblings of discontent from the South are indicative of the fact that we have created many more problems than we have solved. He would say that we are going backwards instead of forwards. He might even get a little intellectual and seek to show that hovering over every man is the tragic taint of original sin, and so at bottom, human nature cannot be changed. He may even turn to the realms of psychology and seek to show the inflexibility of certain attitudes once they have been molded. From all of this, the pessimist would conclude that there can be no progress in the area of race relations.

Now I want you to notice one thing here: That the extreme optimist and the extreme pessimist agree on at least one point. They both agree that we must sit down and do nothing in the area of race relations. The extreme optimist says do nothing because integration is inevitable. The extreme pessimist says do nothing because integration is impossible.

But there is a third position, that is, a third attitude that one can take in this area. Namely, the realistic position. The realist in the area of race relations seeks to combine the truths of two opposites,

while avoiding the extremes of both. So the realist would agree with the optimist that we have come a long, long way, but he would go on to balance that by agreeing with the pessimist that we have a long, long way to go. And it is this realistic position that I would like to use as a basis of our thinking together this evening on the question of progress in race relations. We've come a long, long way, but we have a long, long way to go.

Let us notice first that we've come a long, long way, and I would like to say first under that particular heading that the Negro himself has come a long, long way in reevaluating his own intrinsic worth. In order to illustrate this, a little history is necessary. You will remember that it was in the year of 1619 that the first slaves landed on the shores of this nation. And they were brought here from the soils of Africa. Unlike the Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth a year later, they were brought here against their wills. Throughout slavery, the Negro was treated in a very inhuman fashion. He was a thing to be used, not a person to be respected. He was just something of a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine. The famous Dred Scott decision of 1857 well illustrates the status of the Negro during slavery, where in this decision the Supreme Court of the nation said the Negro is not a citizen of this nation; he is merely property, subject to the dictates of his owner. And this was the attitude that prevailed. Living under these conditions, many Negroes lost faith in themselves. Many came to feel that perhaps they were inferior. So long as the Negro accepted this place assigned to him, a sort of racial peace was maintained. But it was a negative peace. It was not true peace. For as I've said on many occasions, true peace is not merely the absence of some negative force. It is the presence of some positive force.

One of the white citizens of our community in Montgomery was talking with me the other day, and he said, "Brother King, the only thing that hurts me and that concerns me is the fact that for so many years, we had such peaceful race relations in Montgomery.

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We had so much harmony and peace in race relations, and now you people have come to upset the peace." I thought about it, and I tried to talk with him sympathetically, calmly. I looked at him and said, "Well, I guess you're right. We did have peaceful race relations in Montgomery. But it was a negative peace, in which the Negro patiently accepted injustice and exploitation and never protested against it. But we never had real peace in Montgomery. We never had a positive peace. We had a negative peace, which was merely the absence of tension, but true peace is the presence of justice and brotherhood."

One day Jesus stood before a group of men of his generation, and I can imagine that they stood before the Master with that glittering eye, wanting to hear some good. And Jesus looked at them and said in no uncertain terms, "I come not to bring peace but a sword." Jesus didn't mean he came to bring a physical sword. Neither did he mean he did not come to bring true peace. But what Jesus was saying was this: That I come not to bring this old negative peace, which makes for deadening passivity and stagnant complacency. I come to bring positive peace, and whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new. Whenever I come, a division sets in between justice and injustice. Whenever I come, something happens between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. I come not to bring this old negative peace, which is merely the absence of tension, but I come to bring a positive peace, which is the presence of love and brotherhood and the kingdom of God. And the peace which Jesus talks about is always a positive peace.

So the peace which existed at this particular time in our nation was a negative peace devoid of any positive means. Then as the years unfolded, something happened to the Negro. Circumstances made it necessary for him to travel more. His rural plantation background gradually gave way to urban industrial life. His cultural life was gradually rising through the steady decline of crippling illiteracy,

and even his economic life was rising through the growth of industry and the power of organized labor and other agencies.

All of these forces conjoined to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself. Negro masses all over began to reevaluate themselves, and the Negro came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children, and that all men are made in his image. He came to see that every man, from a base black to a treble white is significant on God's keyboard. And so he could not unconsciously cry out with the eloquent poet, "Fleecy locks and black complexion cannot forfeit nature's claim. Skin may differ, but affection dwells in black and white the same. Where I so tall as to reach the pole, or to grasp the ocean at its span, I must be measured by my soul. The mind is the standard of the man."

And with this new sense of dignity and this new self-respect, a new Negro came into being. And the tensions which we witness in the South today can be explained in part by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of his nation and destiny. And his determination to struggle, sacrifice, yes, and even die if necessary, until the walls of segregation have been totally crushed.

This is the meaning, and a part of the meaning of the struggle. We've come a long, long way since 1619. Not only has the Negro come a long, long way in reevaluating his own intrinsic worth. We've come a long, long way in achieving civil rights, and if we are to be true to the facts, we must admit that. Fifty years ago, twenty-five years ago, a year hardly passed that numerous Negroes were not brutally lynched by some vicious mob. Lynchings have about ceased today. We've come a long, long way.

Fifty years ago, or twenty-five years ago, most of the southern states had a way of preventing the Negro from becoming a registered voter through the poll tax. Now the poll tax has been eliminated in all but four states. We've come a long, long way. Even in achieving the

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ballot, we've come a long, long way, and have a long, long way to go, but we've come a long, long way. At the turn of the century, there were not many Negro registered voters in the South. By 1948, that number had leaped to 750,000. By 1952, that number had leaped to 1,300,000. We've come a long, long way. Even in economic development, we've come a long, long way, and so today, the average Negro wage earner makes more, four times more, than the average Negro wage earner in 1940. The national income of the Negro now is more than sixteen billion dollars a year, more than the national income of Canada and more than all of the exports of the United States. We've come a long, long way.

Not only that. In our generation, we've been able to see the walls of segregation gradually crumble. Many years ago, we were taken away into an Egypt of segregation. And it looked like we would never get out. We were carried there in 1896. The Supreme Court of this nation in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision established the doctrine of separate-but-equal as the law of the land, and here we were caught up in the Egypt of segregation. And every time we tried to get out, something prevented us. There was always a Moses crying out in loud and noble terms, "Let our people go." In the midst of the cry of every Moses, there was a Pharaoh with a hardened heart, saying, "I will not let these people go." There was a Red Sea standing before us with discredited [sic] dimensions, and it looked like we would never get out of Egypt. God always controls history. He's never asleep on the job. He works at every moment in history. And there is something about the God that we worship that can open the Red Sea. And so there came May 17, 1954, and by the providence of God and the decision from the Supreme Court, the Red Sea opened, and we were able to get out of Egypt.

Now we aren't in the Promised Land yet. There are Philistines and Horites and Hittites still ahead to be defeated, but at least we've conquered Egypt. We've broken loose from the Egypt of segregation, and we're moving through the wilderness of

adjustment towards the Promised Land of integration. And we're going to get in. Now I know that sometimes it looks difficult, and they're people who are saying we'll never get in. They're the pessimists. And they come back to us and they say, "Now, you know, there are giants over there in that land." And there are many giants there, giants of vested interests, giants of irrational emotionalism, giants of economic power structures. But thank God, Caleb and Joshua have been over, and they have come back with a minority report, and they tell us that we can possess the land. And this evening we stand in this moment of our nation's history, facing the fact that we've come a long, long way since 1896.

Now, my friends, I would like to stop here. I really would. This is a good place to stop. I like to make short speeches. I was telling somebody yesterday that I'm getting more and more like my good friend, Dr. Mordecai Johnson. I get to the place where I can speak an hour and a half and two hours. But I like to make short speeches. And I would really like to stop here. I would really love...this would be a wonderful place to stop. It would be a great place to stop. But I'm afraid that if I stop here, I wouldn't be telling the truth. I'd be stating a fact. You see, a fact is merely the absence of contradiction. The truth is the presence of coherence. It is the relatedness of facts. You see, it's a fact that we've come a long, long way. That's a fact, but it isn't the truth. See, in order to tell the truth, you've got to go on and put the other part to it. If I stopped at this point, I would leave you the victims of a dangerous optimism. If I stopped at this point, I would leave you the victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality, so in order to tell the truth I must move on, and say to you that we've not only come a long, long way...but we have a long, long way to go.

And I will not take the time this evening to go into all of the problems which we confront. Just to make a general statement to assure you that we have a long, long way to go. I mentioned the fact that lynchings have about ceased in our nation, but other things are

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happening, just as bad. Oh, we must think of the fact that many states in our own Southland have risen up in open defiance of the Supreme Court's decision on desegregation. The legislative halls of the South ring loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification." Not only that. We see existing in our nation many tones and many instances of physical violence. We see in the Southland little children who, merely seek[ing] an equal education, are often beaten and often slapped and often kicked around. Individuals who merely stand up for the right to live as a first-class human being often confront bombings and sometimes are brutally shot down on their feet. We have a long, long way to go.

Even in the area of registration and voting, we have a long, long way to go. Conniving methods are still being used in many of the counties in the Deep South to keep Negroes from becoming registered voters. Often questions are asked, from those technical questions that even a Ph.D., or the best-trained lawyer can't answer, to the even more technical question of how many bubbles do you find in a bar of soap. We have a long, long way to go.

Even in the area of economic justice we have a long, long way to go. We've come a long, long way, as I just said, but we must still face the fact that 43 percent of the Negro families of America still make less than \$2,000 a year, while just 17 percent of the white families of America make less than \$2,000; 21 percent of the Negro families make less than \$1,000 a year, while just seven percent of the white families of America make less than \$1,000 a year; 88 percent of the Negro families of America make less than \$5,000 a year, while just 60 percent of the white families of America make less than \$5,000 a year. To put it another way, just 12 percent of the Negro families of America make \$5,000 a year or more, while 40 percent of the white families of America make \$5,000 a year or more. So even in the area of economic justice, we have a long, long way to go.

And more than anything else, segregation is still a fact in America. We have a long, long way to go to conquer segregation itself. It still exists in the South in its glaring and conspicuous form. We still confront it in the North, in its hidden and subtle form. Now, as I implied just a few minutes ago, figuratively speaking, Old Man Segregation is on his deathbed, but history has proven that social systems have a great last minute breathing power. And the guardians of the status quo are always on hand with the oxygen tents to keep the old order alive. And so, segregation is still with us, and there are those who are resisting at every point to keep this system of segregation alive. But as we assemble here this evening, we assemble, I am sure, with the knowledge that if democracy is to live, segregation must die.

Segregation is a cancer in the body politic, which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized. We must come to see the underlying philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of democracy and Christianity, and all the dialectics of theologians cannot make them lie down together. Segregation is a blatant evil. It is against every thing that the Christian religion stands for, for it substitutes the I:It relationship for the I:Thou relationship. It relegates the segregated to the status of a thing, rather than elevat[ing] them to the status of a person. And there is something deep down within our Christian religion that says all men are made in the image of God.

There is something deep down within our Christian religion which cries out across the generations: In Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bound nor free, male nor female, yes, Negro nor white. But we're all one in Christ Jesus. There is something deep down in our faith which says our one Lord God made all men to dwell upon the face of the earth. There is something in our democratic creed which says all men are created equal, and I'm endowed by that Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And segregation ignores all of these things;

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therefore, it is an evil which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized.

So the job ahead is to work hard, all people of good will, to remove this evil which stands in our society. It is hurting us internationally, and I will not go into that. For as we look at the role and tide of world opinion, we come to see that the civil rights issue is not some ephemeral, effervescent domestic issue which can be kicked around by reactionary politicians. But it is an eternal moral issue, which may well determine the destiny of our nation in the ideological struggle with communism. The hour is late. The clock of destiny is ticking out. We must act now before it is too late. The motor is now cranked up. We are moving up the highway of freedom toward the city of equality, and we can't afford to slow up, because our nation has a date with destiny. We must keep moving.

There are those who are saying, yes, we've got to apply moderation. We've got to adopt a policy of moderation. Well, if moderation means moving on towards the goal of justice with wise restraint and calm reasonableness, then moderation is a great virtue that all men of good will must seek to achieve in this tense period of transition. But if moderation means slowing up in the move for justice and capitulating to the whims and caprices of the guardians of the deadly status quo, then moderation is a tragic vice, which all men of good will must condemn. We must keep moving because the hour is late. Our nation is now on trial.

I want to say to you just a few things that we must do to go this additional distance. And I want to say a few things that we, as Negroes, can do. I know that other agencies must be at work. There's a great job for the federal government to do. I wish I had time to go into that. There's a great job that the Christian church must do. I wish I had time to go into that. But we know all too well that the Christian churches too often have a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds.

We had to face the tragic facts for so long, that Sunday morning when we stood to sing "In Christ There Is No East Or West," we stood in the most segregated hour of Christian America. And thank God we're beginning now to shake the lethargy from our eyes, and Christian ministers all over the South and all over this nation are taking stands now. Thank God for that. And the church must continue to act.

Oh, there're things that white persons of good will can do, both North and South, and I wish I had time to go into that, because I believe firmly that there are many more white persons of good will in our Southland than we're able to see on the surface. There are some in Montgomery, Alabama. Don't you think all of the white persons in the South believe in segregation. And then there are some who believe in segregation. They were brought up under the system. They were taught that in their school books. They were taught that by their parents, and it's understandable why they believe in segregation. But even though they sincerely believe that integration is wrong, they at least believe in law and order. They don't believe in physical violence. And I think we have great things to work on in the Southland. I do not think that the [James O.] Eastlands [Mississippi senator, 1941-78] and the [Herman] Talmadges [Georgia senator, 1957-81]...voice the sentiment of the southern white person. I don't think they voice the sentiments of all. They voice the sentiments of a vocal but small minority. I feel that a person like Lillian Smith of Georgia [writer sympathetic to harmonious race relations and author of *Strange Fruit*, a 1944 novel about an interracial love affair], [Harry S.] Ashmore of Arkansas [an editorial journalist], Frank [Porter] Graham of North Carolina [University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill president 1931-49, who ran for the North Carolina Senate in 1950 and lost], even Dr. Billy Graham of North Carolina, and hundreds and thousands of white persons of good will are voicing the sentiments of millions of white persons. And so, let us see the road in the white South. And I believe that there are millions of liberals in our Southland, and I

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appeal to them in the name of God, and for the cause of human dignity, and in the interest of democracy, to join hands and gird their courage and take a stand now, because this is the hour to do it.

Above all of that, above and beyond all of that, there are some things that we must do. And that's what I want to deal with in the next few minutes before us. Things that we must do to go this additional distance, if we are to achieve first-class citizenship in this hour. We must maintain a continual sense of dignity and self-respect. Let nobody make you feel that you're inferior. Feel somehow that you are somebody. And although you have to live under a system which stares you in the face and says, "You are less than; you're not equal to," live in the midst of that system and affirm your own sense of dignity by saying deep down in your heart, "I am somebody. I am somebody. I am somebody because I'm a child of God. He is my father, and he loves all of his children, and if I'm his child, he loves me just as he loves other children." And maintain a continuing sense of dignity, and never become a slave in your mind.

You see, one can be mentally free while physically enslaved. I've never been on the back of the bus. I came up in Atlanta, Georgia. I went to school on the other side of town. There was only one [Negro] high school in Atlanta. I never will forget the experiences that I had, a city of almost 200,000 Negroes, and they only had one high school at that time, but there's more now. But that was back in 1942 and [194]3 and [194]4. I remember every day having to ride the buses from one side of town to the other to get to school. Those buses were segregated. We had to sit on the back, but I'm here to tell you this evening that I never took a seat on the back of the buses. I was only there physically, but my mind was up on the front. Always there. And I said to myself at that hour, "One of these days, my body's going to be up there where my mind is." So let us

maintain a continuing sense of dignity. Let us never feel that we are inferior.

You know the job that Moses confronted when he was trying to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt into the Promised Land? He had some people there, and three groups developed. You noticed that. Many of you, I'm sure have seen the picture of the Ten Commandments, and it's there, you can see it in that picture, and you see it as you read the Bible. Three groups developed, and this is always a problem in going up freedom's road. You have a certain group of people who became so conditioned to Egypt. See, you can become so conditioned to certain things, that you...even if you get to freedom, you'll still act like you used to act. That's possible. You just become so conditioned. And Moses had that group to deal with. They wanted to go back to Egypt. They said, now, we prefer the flush parts of Egypt to being out here in the wilderness, trying to get to the Promised Land.

You know there are some Negroes like that. They have come to the point that they just like segregation. They feel that that's just what they deserve. I was in the Atlanta airport the other day and we were...I was standing there, so there was a little time waiting between flights. I went in the men's room, and there was a Negro attendant in there. And I just went on into the room which said "Men" there. I saw over there they had one that said "Colored," that said "Colored Men," but I just decided I was a man, and I decided I was going in the men's room. I went on in, and this attendant in there came running to me, and said, "The Colored room is over there." I didn't pay any attention to him. "Mister, the Colored room is over there. This is the White room here." So I got tired of him pushing on me and punching me, and said, "Ah, sir, I'm all right." Now mark you, the white people in there, it was full of white people, they hadn't said one thing to me. It was the Negro. So I stopped and said, "Brother, do you mean to tell me every time

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you find it necessary to go to the restroom, you go out of here and go way over there to the Colored room?" "Well, yes sir. That's where we belong."

Now I first reacted with a little bitterness, but then I understood. I became very sympathetic. That man had come up under the system, and he had come to believe that Negroes didn't deserve anything else. There was a place and things were to be separated, and the system had done that. That's what segregation does. There is the danger that segregation will give you the sense of inferiority, and so you feel that this is what you deserve and this is where you belong. And that's what the Supreme Court decision tried to cure. That's one of the things that it said, that segregation gives a sense of inferiority to the segregated. But I am urging you this evening to maintain a sense of self-respect. That was one group that Moses had to confront, that group that preferred Egypt to the Promised Land.

Then he had a second group. They were the schoolteachers and the people who really wanted freedom, but they didn't want to face the sacrifices that were involved in it. They were always talking about, "I might lose my job if I try to go on to the Promised Land." Now they wanted freedom; they wanted it. They wanted freedom. They wanted to enjoy freedom, but they didn't want to face the sacrifices involved in gaining freedom. Moses had to deal with that group. That group of fearful persons. That group of individuals who, because they were in partially vulnerable positions, they used that as an excuse for complacency.

Then he had a third group, and that's a group that...there's always a group that carries history on. And he had a group of people who were willing to go on, in spite of the odds, in spite of the difficulties. They knew the mountains, the obstacles ahead, but they said, "We're going on. We're going on with you, Moses. And we are willing to face anything, because we know that our destiny is in the Promised Land."

Let us not fit into the group that wanted to go back to Egypt. Let us not become a part of that group that is somehow living in a state of fear, afraid to act, accepting things that one does not have to accept. But let us get in line with that third group, and maintain a continuing sense of self-respect.

Let me rush on to say that we must seek to gain the respect of others by improving our own standards. I don't want to stay on this too long, and I know the danger of what I'm about to say, because it can be misinterpreted. And let me rush on to say that some of our standards lag behind, we must admit. They lag behind because of segregation. I'm convinced of that. I think it is a tortuous logic, to use the tragic effects of segregation as an argument for the continuation of it. A man told me in Montgomery, Alabama, that integration is all right, but it needs to be put off about 75 years, because Negroes aren't ready culturally and academically, and they'll pull the white race back a generation. And my answer to him was that certainly that isn't true. You can't say that's true of all Negroes. The second thing is that these conditions exist because of segregation, and the thing to do is to remove the cause. Don't be dealing...only with the effects, but go on down and remove the cause. Don't just give an aspirin here, but go on down to the surgical point and get to the cause of the thing.

But we have to admit, we have to admit that at points our standards do lag behind. And we need to work on these things, as we work to remove the cause. We have a dual responsibility. We must work to remove the basic cause of all of our problems, our economic insecurity, our cultural lag, our health lag, and all of that. And at the same time, we must work to improve these effects that have come into being as a result of segregation. Now we just have to face it. We kill each other too much. We have to face that. We have to face that. Our crime rates are still too high. We've got to face that. And we've got to improve on that. We must face the fact that there are so many areas and there are so many things that we can do. And

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let us start now and sit down by the wayside and pull down the curtains of our lives, and the shades, and look at ourselves and say, "Can we improve ourselves here?" Look at the complaints that many of the white reactionaries have against us, and remove those that don't make any sense. If they aren't true, well, just push them aside. They say we want to be integrated because we want to marry their daughters. Well, we know that isn't true. We know that isn't true. The Negro's concern basically isn't to be the white man's brother-in-law, but to be his brother. We know that's true.

But there are other things that are said, and if they are true, let's do something about it. If our health standards lag behind, let's do something about them. Oh, it may not be possible for us to take a flight tomorrow morning and fly over to Paris and buy the most expensive perfumes, but all of us can be clean. Anybody can buy a nickel bar of soap....

Let us improve our moral standards. We don't have to have the highest illegitimacy rate in every city. We don't need to do it. We don't have to have a Ph.D....or an M.A. degree or an A.B. degree. We don't have to have a lot of money to be good and honest and moral and upright. We must convince the white man that if we walk the streets, we're not walking around thinking about sex every day, for we know that we are made for eternity, created for the everlasting, born for the stars. That is something deep down within us that gives us a sense of our own moral integrity and well being. And where we don't have it, let us improve it. Let us demand...respect from others by improving our own standards where they can be improved, so that we deal with this.

And let us continue to gain the ballot, gain political power through wise use of the ballot. Now I'm not here to tell you how to vote. That isn't my concern. I'm not a politician. I have no political ambitions. I don't think the Republican Party is a party full of the Almighty God, nor is the Democratic Party. They both have

weaknesses. And I'm not inextricably bound to either party. I'm not concerned about telling you what party to vote for. But what I'm saying is this: That we must gain the ballot and use it wisely. I've come to see recently that one of the most decisive steps that the Negro can take is that short walk to the voting booth. And don't put it all on resistance. It's true that in many areas in my state of Alabama Negroes aren't registered in many instances because they can't register because the resistance is strong. Because the registrars refuse to register them. But I don't think that's true in Greensboro, North Carolina. Many Negroes aren't registered because they're too lazy to go down and get registered. And you have here, and we have in many cities all over the South, the opportunity to gain the ballot. And even where we have strong resistance we have a Civil Rights Bill, now, which I hope will help us a great deal. So let us go out to gain the ballot and to use it wisely.

And let us continue to give big money for the cause of freedom. Integration is not some lavish dish that will be passed out by the white man on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite. We've got to do more than that. We've got to sacrifice, and we're going to have to give some money. The days ahead are still days of difficulty. We still have a long, long way to go. And let us use our money wisely. We can't say any longer that we don't have it. I just mentioned a few minutes ago that we have an annual income now of almost \$17 billion a year. And we get almost everything else we want. We ride around in some of the biggest cars that have ever been let loose into history. And I'm not condemning this. I know how it is. I know...we want to have some of the basic goods of life. We want to have some of the luxuries of life. But what I'm saying is, let's maintain a sense of values.

We don't have time to spend a lot of money on whiskey and big parties and a lot of stuff, and we aren't giving money to the basic causes that confront us now. It will be an indictment on the Negro if it is revealed that we spend more money on frivolities than we

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spend on the cause of freedom and justice. And I've been in situations...I've seen us in many of our social groups, our fraternities and our Masonic and our Elks and what have you, spending more money on frivolities than we spend on the cause of freedom and justice. I remember one year that a certain fraternity assembled with other fraternities and spent in one week \$500,000 [sic] on whiskey. That's what the paper reported. Negroes spend more money in one week, just a handful, in one week than the whole Negro race spent that whole year for the NAACP and the United Negro College Fund. Now that's tragic. That's tragic, my friends. We've got to get a sense of values.

Now you don't like some of these things I'm saying. You're not saying amen too much right through in here, but I'm saying things that I think are basic for us. Things that are basic. Not only that, we must continue to develop wise, courageous, and sincere leadership. This is a need all over the South and all over the nation. We need leaders who are sincere. Leaders of integrity. Leaders who are intelligent. Leaders who [avoid] the extremes of hot-headedness and Uncle Tomism. Leaders who somehow have the vision to see the issues and have the courage to stand there. Leaders not in love with money, but in love with humanity. Leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with justice. Oh, this is the great need of this hour. As I look out...over our nation, God has given many of you talent. God has given many of you economic resources, and he's given you educational resources. And this is the challenge and an opportunity of the hour to use these things to furnish leadership for our nation in this hour. Let none of us become so high on the intellectual, the economic ladder, or any of these particular ladders, that we become separated from the problems that the masses of people confront. Let us discover that we will never get into the Promised Land until all of us get there together.

And oh, we need leaders at this hour all over this nation. God, give us leaders! A time like this demands great leaders. Leaders whom the lust of office does not kill. Leaders whom the spoils of life cannot buy. Leaders who have armor. Leaders who will not lie. And leaders who can stand before [a] demagogue and damn his treacherous flatteries without winking [sic]. Tall leaders, sun crowned, who live above the fog in public duty and in private thinking. That is one of our great needs, as we go on this additional distance.

I'm coming now to the conclusion. But before ending, I want to say one basic thing to you. Let us, as we move on, continue to struggle with the weapons of love and nonviolence. We must work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship, but let us not use second-class methods to gain it. That is the danger.

As I look over the long and broad struggle of oppressed people, it seems to me that there are three ways for oppressed people to deal with their oppression, and I want to ask you to choose one of them tonight, and I hope you will choose the right one. One is to rise up against your oppressor with hate and physical violence, and to break loose from oppression through armed revolt. This is a method that we all know about. Those of us who live in America know about it. It has become something of the inseparable twin of Western Imperialism. It is even the hallmark of its grandeur. We know about it. And I'm not here to say to you tonight that victories can't be won through violence. If a person says that victory has never been won through violence, he doesn't know history. Nations have received their independence through violence. I know that. But that is the problem.

Violence only brings about temporary victories, never permanent peace. We're coming to see in our world today the futility of violence, not only in the racial struggle, but in the international

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struggle. It is no longer the choice between violence and nonviolence. It is today nonviolence or nonexistence. In a day when Sputniks and Explorers dash around outer space, nobody can win a war. We must come to see now that violence is not the way. If [the] Negro succumbs to the temptation of using violence in the struggle, unborn generations would be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and our chief legacy to the future would be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. There is still a voice crying through the vista of time, saying...to put up your sword. History is replete with the bleached bones of nation. The way that I discussed a little earlier, that is through acquiescence or resignation. Just resign yourself to the fate of repression. People have done that. They just accept it, and they resign themselves to it, and they adjust to it. There again, that isn't the way.

Noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. And if somehow I accept segregation without letting the segregator know that I don't like it, I'm cooperating with him. And I'm just as evil in doing that as he is in carrying on the system. For the religion says to every man that you are your brother's keeper. And if I make my brother think that I like segregation when I don't really like it, if I tell him that I like the way I'm treated when I don't really like it, I'm not his keeper, for I cooperate with him in evil. So the way is not to acquiesce and resign oneself to the fate of oppression.

So we come to a third way, and that is a way of nonviolent resistance. Where we resist, and yet we do it through nonviolent means. We stand up with a powerful "no" to injustice, but with a powerful "yes" to brotherhood and love. It seems to me that this is the way that all over we must organize, nonviolently, en masse, to resist the system of segregation, but at the same time we must maintain love in our hearts, and we must move with the method of nonviolence. If we will do that, I think we will be able to transform

a dark night into a glowing daybreak. I think we will be able to make of this old world a new world. Somehow we must be able to look our southern brothers in the eye, and those who would mistreat us, and those who would misuse us, and believe that unearned suffering is redeeming.

Let us, if it's necessary, be the victims of violence but never the perpetrators of violence. And then we will be able to stand before our brothers in the South and say, "We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we will still love you. Burn our homes, and we'll still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hours and take us out on some wayside road and beat us and leave us there, half dead, and we will still love you. Run all around the country and make it appear that we're not fit morally and culturally for integration, and we will still love you. Take our children and spit in their faces and slap them if you may, and we will still love you." So this, it seems to me, is a way that's open for us.

And I give you a personal testimony of my own faith. I believe, my friends, as I leave Greensboro, that we're going, we're going, we're going to do this. We will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. And then one day we will win our freedom, but not only will we win our freedom, we will so appeal to your heart and conscience that we will win you in the process. And our victory will be doubled.



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## “COME BACK, MARTIN LUTHER KING”

C. Eric Lincoln

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*Delivered at the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel*

*Bennett College*

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Two hundred years ago, the American founding fathers gave to the world “a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” They also laid it down in the record of establishment that every man was endowed by his Creator with certain “inalienable rights,” among which were life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Two long centuries have come, and two long centuries have gone, and we who now stand trembling in the room they left search frantically for some clue that the legacy bequeathed to us is possible of social and political realization.

In our confusion and our doubt we may be cheered from time to time by the recollection that we had our beginnings in a commitment to a moral and religious perfection rather than in the

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pragmatics of politics; and that the pre-eminent American heritage is the errand into the wilderness which brought the courage and the zeal and the ethic of Protestantism to the bleak shores of Massachusetts Bay; and that while the Protestant commitment did indeed embrace the notion of empire, what they had intended was a righteous empire – a city to be set on a hill, as it were, to be the model of faith and practice for all men and all time to come. So pervasive and so enduring has been this notion of American religious and moral manifest destiny that fully 300 years after it was first voiced, an American President, Mr. Woodrow Wilson, could announce without a trace of a blush that “America was born a Christian nation for the purpose of exemplifying to the nations of the world the principles of righteousness found in the word of God.”

Today we are somewhat less certain and we have sufficient reason to be. As we move on into the third century of our nationhood “under God,” the drums of celebration are muted, and the banners proclaiming our national greatness hang limp for want of a fair breeze of conviction. The sober-minded turn to introspection and those who believe in the righteousness of God tremble in the anticipation of his justice.

We ask ourselves: What happened to the promise that was America? Seldom indeed in the annals of human history has a nation been born under such auspicious circumstances, with so many mature and able statesmen attending her birth. Never before in modern times has a nation been so certain of the sure hand of God on the tiller of its destiny, or committed itself so irrevocably to divine hegemony and precept. And never has any nation found itself in such wretched default of its own avowed principles before the words of our founding document were fairly formed, or the ink was dry on the parchment. And therein lies the genesis of our continuing dilemma, or national sickness.

We have been talking about the symptoms of a disease and not the disease itself. We know too well the cultural nostrums with which we have dosed ourselves against the painful recognition of how sick we really are. We have demeaned intelligence and prostituted communication in tacit avoidance of the issue we recognize to be the root cause of our national malaise. It is time now to face the issue squarely, confront the truth and be cleansed of the pollution of pretense.

In the language of the faith we claim to cherish, America has sinned – mightily, consistently, and with conscious deliberation. Our cardinal sin is idolatry – corporate racial idolatry. This is our national disease. And from this malignancy there oozes a corruption which poisons everything it touches: the schools, the churches, the courts, the military, the places where we work, the communities where we live, our politics, our economics – every level of social and personal intercourse. Racism is our common sickness and our common legacy. It is endemic to the culture and so pervasive that there are no islands of immunity, or varying degrees of malignancy.

The congenital pus that infects the one of us affects the other. Everyday of our lives we must deal with hate and with the hate that hate produced. Every hour of the day we are conditioned by fear that produces fear that produces fear, our mutual hatred and our mutual fear our common resort to somehow be vindicated by some divine substantiation, the shadowy myths we have elected to live by. Yet, we know in our hearts that God will not be mocked, even as we know that in the deliberate disregard of the implications of our brotherhood we reject the implications of his common fatherhood. The wanton distortion of history, the arbitrary devaluation of human life, the cheap retreat from spiritual and political responsibility create no options for divine rescue. They do invite God's scrutiny and God's judgment.

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Racism is our shibboleth. It is the sign and symbol by which we are known and remembered around the world for this civilization cursed itself long before it became a nation. The white men and women who founded it with such high purpose let that purpose be demeaned by the enslavement of those black men and women called to maintain and develop what they had founded. Clearly, no Christian community worthy of the name can be built on the bondage and oppression of one brother by another, whether with chains or whether with laws; or whether with the fetters of ignorance, mysteries of doctrine, the logic of power. So it was that the political experiment in the West addressed itself to failure before it was scarcely begun. But God is gracious and though man is weak he is still the subject of God's love and redemption. Man is a creature of free will, and if he is able to make the conscious decisions which promote evil then he can make a conscious decision to undo that evil. God will not have it any other way. Man cannot have it any other way.

Three times since this land was first cursed by man's refusal to face his Father and acknowledge his brother, an historic occasion to relent, to repent and accept redemption, has been granted to America. The first was at the very birth of the nation, the bicentennial of which has but recently consigned itself to history. At the birth of this nation the statesmen were both eloquent and profuse in their denunciations of the British King for allegedly forcing upon the colonies that peculiar institution they so readily elected to take with them into nationhood. The choice ought to have been to use the occasion of newly won autonomy to gratefully restore their own integrity, so willfully compromised for 150 years, by restoring freedom and dignity to the captives they held enthralled. The insistent rhetoric about liberty and freedom and justice, and the pious commitment to nationhood under God, rang hollow against the pitiful cries of the slaves whose freedom never reached the agenda of deliberation.

White men, Black men fought and died  
That all men might be free  
But when the fighting was all done  
And when the victory was won  
Who gained the jubilee?  
Who gained the jubilee?  
The whites who lived  
The blacks who died  
Were set at liberty.

Thus did this nation repudiate an extraordinary opportunity to cleanse itself and get on with the business of a righteous empire in the West. And thus did the nation indulge at the outset a delusion which has remained for it a continuing dilemma – the fantasy that a Christian democracy can rest securely on a doctrine of equality and the practice of inequality – by race; a doctrine patently in contradiction to itself, and to every recognized principle of human justice.

The Civil War was fought mainly over issues tangential to what had finally come to be recognized as the problem most critical to American peace and prosperity, the continuance of human slavery. But the Civil War represented a second national occasion for the reconstruction of the American understanding of a right relationship to God and man, and the institutionalization of appropriate attitudes and behavior. Again, we defaulted. The war was fought; the slaves were freed: the mentality that made slavery possible remained intact. In time it would spread, adapting itself to new requirements of respectability. The mentality itself had never been restricted to any single region of the country, although its expression and its intensity did vary with the economic and social requirements of those who harboured it. It was a way of seeing things; a perspective on reality; a world view parochialized by an inordinate preoccupation with the accidents of color. A hundred

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years later, in a spasm of fear and outrage the cosmetics of respectability would, for an ugly and perilous interlude, be forgotten, and "civilized America would be turned back toward a state of nature." We could have anticipated the seizure and prepared for it. Instead, we prepared to deal with the symptoms instead of the disease, as we have always been wont to do.

At about the time the staging for the World War II holocaust was being completed and the players had taken their stations behind the doubtful curtain of international diplomacy, perhaps, with some premonition of how changed the world would be when the war was over, America had become increasingly apprehensive about how well or how ill we were managing our moral and political contradictions at home. Accordingly, we called in Gunnar Myrdal, a respected social scientist from Sweden, who after several years of reading the statistics and scouting the country to observe the American way first hand, advised us in a lengthy compendium that America had a problem. He called it the "Negro problem." The problem created a dilemma. He called it the "American dilemma," and this is what he said about it:

The American Negro problem is a problem in the heart of America.... It is there that the decisive struggle goes on... "The American Dilemma".... is the ever-raging conflict between...the valuations (of)... the American creed," where the American thinks, talks and acts under the influence of high national and Christian precepts, and on the other hand the valuations on specific planes of individual and group living. Where personal and local interests, economic, social and sexual jealousies... and all sorts of miscellaneous wants, impulses and habits dominate his outlook.

This "problem in the heart of America" is no less persistent now than when Myrdal set out to document it thirty years ago. It may be less obvious and therefore less imperative, but its effects on all classes of Americans remain the same. Perhaps from the pragmatic perspective of the social sciences, it is indeed a "Negro problem," as Myrdal declared it to be, but it has always seemed to me to be rather a problem of moral and social deficiencies in the ability to assess realistically the value of the self, and to relate that assessment to an adequate valuation of others. The derivative dilemma is the inconsistency between the criteria of valuation, and the irreconcilability of what we claim to be and what we are.

In any case, Dr. Myrdal told us little we did not know already. In the final analysis, his documentation of the American dilemma, like many other "studies" of American behavior, had principally a cathartic effect – born of the age-old illusion that in studying the problem we had done something about it.

In the aftermath of war many of the conventions the world had lived by were suddenly obsolete. In Africa, in colonial Asia, in the United States, there was revolutionary spirit abroad which threatened to delay indefinitely the return to normalcy and business as usual. The world as it was before the Hitlerian era would never be reconstructed. For us at home, the possibility that the blood we left on the beaches of Europe and the atolls of the Pacific would be replicated on the streets of New York and Chicago and Atlanta became the pre-eminent concern of the guardians of the establishment. The military was alerted; the federal agencies of intelligence and investigation were staked-out among the citizens. New "reception centers" were secretly prepared for the disaffected; and an amazing array of mobile armor and sophisticated weaponry was purchased at great cost by the local governments to use against some mysterious "enemy" who was never identified. We were all on the way to a solution of the problem by the only means in which we

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seem to have confidence – extermination. If it worked against the Indians, why wouldn't it settle the “Negro problem” once and for all?

It was at this juncture that for the third time in our national existence Divine Providence offered a way out – a higher way in perfect consonance with all our professions of Christian love and brotherhood in a just and humane society. From the legions of the disinherited God raised a prophet, a black man, who had known the jackboot of oppression, but whose chosen response was a gospel of love. He was a lowly man, humble, but full of hope; sagacious, but full of dreams – dreams for the future of America, the country he loved and longed to see put right. His name was Martin Luther King, Jr. He came teaching peace, preaching forgiveness, and showing by precept his own full commitment to all he asked America to do. He came neither to the Jews, nor yet to the Gentiles but to all who stand in the fear of judgment, saying, “This is the way.” Wherever he went those who had reached the end of their endurance found new strength; and those who had so lately given themselves to violence on behalf of their country laid down their arms and occupied the violence heaped upon them at the hands of their countrymen. In simple faith and hope and prayer they sustained each other, those who abused them were confounded by the peace they knew as they offered their bodies to be brutalized, and their lives to be a symbol of their determination that men among men should be men, and so received. Black and white they were. Men and women of all faiths bound by the common faith that “we shall overcome.” And so they marched ‘til convulsed by the enormity of their own behavior, the agents of the prevailing social sentiment finally leashed their attack dogs, sheathed their electric cattle prods, turned in their riot guns and retired from public view.

The tragedy is, the continuing dilemma is, that neither the agents of the law nor the principals they represented have ever retired

from the conviction that whoever is black is an interloper in a world intended to be white. Yet, the social conventions which had for so long demeaned and [compromised] the dignity of black people had been publicly shattered and broken in the dust. Black and white together, one unity of believers in the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, had brought America, first kicking and screaming, and finally in a sullen compliance to the very edge of the fountain of redemption. But America has always balked at the final moment of truth about racial matters. Once again, she saw the waters and drank not thereof.

We did not overcome. We have not overcome.

Martin Luther King, Jr. is dead, a target of hatred he struggled to displace with love, a statistic of violence he tried to teach America to abjure. His memory is enshrined in the hearts of all those touched by his sacrifice and encouraged by his dream, but his doctrine has already faded from the working agendas of social change. He stands to be relegated in time to the category of a “great Negro leader,” and given his assigned place in the doubtful parthenon of “Negro achievement.” This is America’s highest tribute to her sons and daughters who are black. That is the only recognition America knows how to give. But how different from what Martin Luther King, Jr. gave to America – the unconditioned, unrestricted opportunity to redeem itself, to regenerate itself, to free itself finally of the enormous burden of living a lie, in conflict with its own ideals.

The wheel turns, and we move on down the road toward a fate that is predictable. The minions we pay to preserve our narcosis beguile us with examples of progress and statistics of achievement, all safely within the parameters of pre-determined change. But in the streets is the sound and the fury of the status quo ante, and in the faces of people we see the old hatreds, the old doubts, the old

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determinations. And we know intuitively as we know experientially that the only real change is the date on the calendar.

Hear the words of Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame, as he comments on the status of our national dilemma:

The fast pace of progress in the sixties was slowed in the seventies.... New banners of ethnicity were waved; idealism was replaced by political pragmatism; leaders followed instead of leading; the slowdown and the slipback began, led by the most powerful officials in the land.... We have come down from a high peak in our history and are presently in a valley.... Yet, with all the burden of ingrained prejudice and hatred, I believe that our age more than any age, knows that this is wrong.

Yes, we know. And in knowing we have abused the patience of God even as we have ignored the lessons of history. How long? How long can a nation deceive itself? I hear the litanies of peace, but peace is far from us. The theologies of hope abound, but any theology not addressed to the relevant, critical experiences of the people is an irreverent shimmer of tinsel that demeans the holy event. What is our hope? What is our promise? The people wait in doubt and confusion for lack of some clarifying word, some hope for a change that is real.

We turn again to the memory of Martin Luther King, whose life was itself the clearest expression of what America claimed to be but never was. We look again at the America he knew and the America he dreamed about, and because we share his dreams we wish that somehow he could be here now, alas! not to see those dreams fulfilled, for that is a long way off, but to bring us together again and to revive us in the continuing struggle toward the realization of what he dreamed about.

Come back, Martin Luther King  
Pray with me, and hold my hand  
and help me still  
the turbulence  
the agitation that shakes me  
when I walk the streets  
of Boston  
where once you drew your  
strength.

O see how quickly there  
the people have forgot.

Do you hear  
the mothers in the street?  
Hail Mary!  
Hail Mary!  
Burn the buses!  
Kill the niggers!  
Hail Mary!  
Hail Mary!  
Hail Mary!

Come back, Martin Luther King  
And teach us  
as once you taught us  
to forgive  
Teach us  
as once you taught us  
to endure.  
For we are not assured.  
The friends we used to know  
have long since quit the scene  
the responsible people  
the proper Bostonians  
whose names gild the log  
of the Mayflower  
are silent and remote

in retirement from the cause.  
Who marched with you  
in Selma  
Keep to their tents  
in Boston  
Nor are their voices raised  
to quiet the weary tumult  
and give the people  
respite  
from the strife.

Come back, Martin Luther King  
see how  
the famous churches  
see how  
the great cathedrals  
that once seized your public  
moment  
to gild their own pretensions  
are shuttered for want of a cause  
stand silent  
for want of a voice.

Come back, Martin Luther King  
The dreamers you left with your  
dream  
Wake not to the task of  
dreaming

The dream languishes

The cock crows  
I hear the tolling of bells

There is no sound of trumpets!  
When shall we overcome?  
When shall we overcome?

<sup>1</sup>Gunnar, Mydral, *An American Dilemma*, New York, 1962, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>*The Humane Imperative*, New Haven, 1974.





